



TRANSLATING OUT OF BREATH

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Perhaps the readers of this compact short story will have a similar experience to mine on seeing it on the page: I literally gulped the moment I opened the file containing my assigned text for translation and encountered a huge single paragraph with nothing but one long sentence spread throughout a page and a half. “Fôlego” (meaning “breath”, “gasp”, “gulp of air” in Portuguese) is, indeed, a “breathing out” of the narrator’s traumatized memories, which run over each other as he describes his experiences in a psychiatric clinic – a stream of consciousness which seems to bewilder the narrator as much as it might bewilder the reader. The latter must, indeed, try to keep his breath flowing while reading the never-ending sentence.

Translating a stream of consciousness narrative is an interesting experience: just as one would do in real life, the narrator often changes the subject and introduces one story inside another, and the translator must follow the train of thought, making sure it is as clear and seemingly random as the original. Hence the text’s fluidity rendered an experience which was both simple and challenging. Because the diction is highly vocal, the phrases were generally easy to transmit into English; but due to the same reason, the expressions used – some very typically Brazilian – forced me to spend long periods questioning issues such as what the Anglo-Saxon equivalent for “pra chuchu” or “pra dedéu” might be.

The short length of the text evidenced the importance and specificity of Lucas Verzola’s word choice, but an even greater awareness of the authorial intention was emphasized in the light of the delicate theme of the story. As we first gathered in our meeting room at University College London to discuss possible translation strategies for Verzola’s text, Nara Vidal, co-organiser of the Translation Club, showed us a Brazilian book called “Holocausto Brasileiro” [Brazilian Holocaust] written by the journalist Daniela Arbex which tells the real story of the psychiatric clinic Colônia de Barbacena, in the south-eastern state of Minas Gerais. Founded in 1903, its inmates endured similar tortures as those described in “Fôlego” (ARBEX, 2013). Not only mentally ill people would be taken there, but also those who were socially ostracized for various reasons, and about sixty thousand people died in the clinic. Apart from explaining the real-life basis of the short story, Nara also read aloud a note from Verzola, written for one of the editions of his book, and through it we learnt that his text had been composed from the perspective of a young boy who had lived through those experiences.

From that moment on, the discussion was not simply about grammar or diction, but it acquired an undertone of one’s awareness of dealing with historical fiction, with real occurrences. This again evidenced the need



for a careful analysis of the word choice. For instance, the Portuguese term used by the narrator to describe himself and the other boys inside the place was “internos”. While I had at first translated it as “inmates”, other participants of the BTC chose “patient”. And this, of course, would provide different connotations: the former made the setting sound like a prison, while with “patients” the reader might think that the characters would have chosen to be there. Similar problems arouse with the translation of the watchdogs’ uniform: was it an apron, like a nurse’s, or a crazy scientist’s lab coat?

Indeed, one of the things that struck me as the Club discussed the first draft of my translation was how many different interpretations were presented, and some not even having to do with the vocabulary. We questioned whether the narrator was the boy, recently fled, or the man looking back to his repulsive memories; but the vocabulary and expressions of the original text were our hint to the child’s voice in the narration. One of the participants, furthermore, claimed that the presence of a number of insistently methodological details (how the inmates tracked the passing of time by writing on walls; the constant references to the first floor; the naming of people through numbers) pointed to the possibility of the whole narration representing a metaphor, perhaps alluding to parallel experience. This raised further questions: is the short story meant to be taken literally? Or should the reader attempt to visualize something else? All this, without even mentioning the questions I was hesitant to leave open in my translation: at the end of the original text, for instance, the narrator claims to wish that neither he nor “any close friends” would be taken. He does not say those were his friends: was the pronoun left absent on purpose?

Even the Brazilian expressions were not read in the same way by the participants, reminding everyone of the richness and complexities of the Portuguese language. The “crossed fingers” mentioned at the beginning of the story is my translation of “figas”. For me, it means the same as crossing one’s fingers, as if wishing for something to happen; for other Brazilians, such gesture reflects lying, while the actual “figas” refers to the action of closing one’s hand into a tight fist, with the thumb between two fingers. Wishing to avoid the need for a footnote, I kept the image of the crossed fingers.

One of the most interesting parts of our discussion came up as we reached the end of the text, when the narrator speaks of his friends “dis-existing”. The invention of words is a common feature in Brazilian literature, but we were aware that English readers might not find it as pleasing. How does one translate an inexistent word? Though I could have chosen an existing English word which would pass the message just as well, I again clung to the authorial intention while trying to keep it simple, and so chose to use a hyphen. (After my English colleague claimed to have read “sexist” instead of “disexist” on my first draft, I realized how useful hyphens are for Portuguese-English translations.)



Though attempting to keep the authorial intention in mind as far as possible, I took some liberties in my translation. Bearing in mind the difficulty of following the narrative, I was careful to keep the rhythm of the original text while adding and/or changing some punctuation marks to facilitate the reading, making it as clear as possible. While Verzola only used dashes once at the start of the text and then relied fully on commas, I alternated between dashes, semi-colons and parentheses, and introduced some pauses. I removed some repetitions which, though they reemphasized the vocal tone of the narrative in the original, would stop and disturb the reading in English. Furthermore, I often chose the most simple and obvious translation of words and phrases, considering that the narrator would have said things in a rush and as they came to his mind. I hence avoided poetic sentences and even changed the syntax of the original, by writing “my body froze” instead of “would freeze” at the beginning, for instance. Verzola made a good job in his work with rhythm, as it builds up at the end and eventually slows down as the narration reaches the end, which I also preserved.

Translating from one’s native into a second language is challenging. I was not sure about many of the expressions, but thankfully the discussion with the other participants of the Club was really helpful. Just as the reading of the text is interpreted as a “breathing out”, so it was with the experience of translating it: natural, fluid, spontaneous... and breath-taking. I followed the narrator’s breath, becoming myself breathless – as I hope this story will leave you, too.

REFERENCES

ARBEX, Daniela. Holocausto brasileiro: vida, genocídio e 60 mil mortes no maior hospício do Brasil. São Paulo: Geração Editorial, 2013.